

Fire—Who

After seven days of dropping bombs and refining our weapon tactics in beautiful Hawaii, it was time to return to sunny California. The day began very early with the loading of luggage and maintenance equipment, since the maintainers were traveling the same day. After completing a brief with the Air Force at zero-dark-thirty, we were delayed to let four Falcons take off first. The Air Force did not want all 10 planes to converge in the same piece of sky over Molokai. Heaven forbid you might rendezvous with the wrong tanker!

The delay was about 30 minutes, and we were finally airborne with a three-ship of S-3s. The rendezvous with the KC-135 tanker was uneventful, as well as the initial drogue check to make sure the tanker was sweet. We were on our way for at least seven hours of flying—it seems we went to Hawaii with a headwind, and we were going home from Hawaii with a headwind.

The boredom of the flight was only broken up with two in-flight refuelings, so it was mind-numbing. My first wake-up call came when we penetrated clouds. They were not very thick, but they did give me a chance to fight fatigue and boredom.

As we approached the outer ADIZ near Southern California, we began to discuss breaking up the flight. The KC-135 had enough fuel to continue to Travis AFB, and the crew was anxious to begin their northward journey. We had used less fuel than anticipated, and they were eager to reach their final destination.

Dash 2 developed oil-pressure problems on the No. 2 engine, and the pilot had to retard it to idle. Now our flight definitely had to break up or slow down, since Dash 2 could not keep up. The KC-135 aircrew began coordinating a direct flight to Southern California with air traffic control (ATC),

while we slowed down to stay together. Maybe he was not going straight to Travis after all.

The Dash 2 pilot kept the engine at idle and monitored the situation. Shortly after getting everything squared away with ATC, Dash 2 developed another problem. The hydraulics for the No. 1 engine had less than two gallons remaining. Thank goodness he had not shut down No. 2 engine, or he would have had no choice but to swim for California. A quick check revealed no hydraulic fluid coming from his port side, but he did have oil all over the trailing edge of his starboard flaps. The No. 2 motor was not doing well but had to remain running since it could be the only source of hydraulics. The No.1 hydraulic low-level light stayed on, ruling out the use of the emergency hydraulic pump.

Finally, we were in sight of NAS Southern California, and we could break up the flight and let Dash 2 land. Once he was safely on deck, lead and I came into the break and landed.

We were on deck, and all jets were safe, so it was time to head for the O Club. As we called for taxi-to-the-line, I observed we still were up tactical on the back radio. We were getting close to the line and wanted to switch up base radio. I instructed the COTAC to switch radio No.2 to base. As we made a right turn, fuel ran from my refueling probe door across my windscreen and down the left side of the aircraft.

As we approached the flight line, we started the auxiliary power unit (APU). We had just come to a stop since the lead and Dash 2 were getting their brakes checked, when I heard the COTAC yell, “Ground says our No. 1 engine is on fire.” “Who, me?” I wondered. I keyed ground frequency and said, “Say again for Dash 3.” Ground



, Me?

by Cdr. Ross Myers

control repeated the call that our No.1 engine was on fire. I scanned the instruments and saw nothing, no abnormalities and definitely no fire lights. I looked out the portside and saw nothing and then looked inside at the instruments one more time.

This time, the APU fire light started to illuminate. We shut down the APU and activated the fire extinguisher. The fire light went out.

That had been a close one, but wait, here came the crash crew. I told ground control that the fire was out, and we needed no further assistance. I had shut down the No. 2 engine in preparation to pull into the line, which now was blocked by the crash crews. Eager to

complete their mission and extinguish a blaze, the crash crews unrolled their fire hoses and proceeded to aim the fully charged hoses at my No. 1 engine. Hurriedly, I instructed the COTAC to exit the aircraft and stop the crash crews from shooting any water. I watched for the slightest indication that would hint of the fire still burning, or that the crash crews were going to spray water down my perfectly good engine.

After a few tense seconds, which seemed like 10 minutes, I got a thumbs-up from the crash crew that all was well, and I could proceed to the flight line.

Upon shutdown and postflight inspection, I noticed the left side of the aircraft had a black charred spot about four feet long behind my canopy. In hindsight, maybe I should not have started the APU after I saw fuel run across my windscreen during the taxi back to the line. 🦅

Cdr. Myers is the XO of VS-33.

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